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ABSTRACT

The description reported here is the result of an analysis of two major dimensions of the occupation of the senior high school principal: the orientations engendered by occupational structures and the meanings attached by principals to their work. A guide was developed for use in semi-structured "intensive," "elite" interviews with 15 principals in central Ohio. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in the principals' own schools. The general and open-ended questions focused on those dimensions of the occupation that provide insights into its ethos--the structures of occupational recruitment, socialization, and reward, and the meanings that high school principals attach to their work. The following dimensions reflect the basic elements of the principal's occupational ethos: an insular view of the high school social system, an emphasis on leadership style, a concern for the process of schooling rather than for the product, and a sense of control over the domain of the high school. (Author/IBT)

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TOWARD A DESCRIPTION OF THE OCCUPATIONAL ETHOS OF THE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP

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TOWARD A DESCRIPTION OF THE OCCUPATIONAL ETHOS OF THE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP*

Scott Thomson, Executive Director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has suggested that the high school is among the best known and least understood public institutions in America (in Byrne, Hynes and McCleary, 1978). The same suggestion holds true as to knowledge and understanding of the work of some 15,000 people who are principals of public secondary schools in America. The fundamental purpose of this study was to investigate in some detail and describe the occupational ethos of the American high school principal. A desired result of this effort is a contribution to knowledge and understanding of the senior high school principalship.

Several recent studies have suggested that the key to a good school is a good principal (Abramowitz, et al., 1978; Byrne, Hynes and McCleary, 1978; Kean, et al., 1979; Ellett, et al., 1976; Wagstaff, et al., 1979). Unfortuantely, there is a paucity of descriptive information on the principalship in general, and the senior high school principal in particular. While the senior high school principalship has been discussed, prescribed, studied, editorialized, criticized, improved, and even abolished in recent years, it has rarely been <u>described</u> empirically. The descriptive work that has been done on the principalship has involved either intensive description of a single individual (Wolcott, 1973; Jentz, 1977, 1978), or extensive normative surveys which provide descriptive information about the characteristics of those individuals who are principals (Byrne, Hynes and McCleary, 1978; Abramowitz, et al., 1978).

*This work was done as part of the writer's dissertation research in the Ph.D. program of the Faculty of Educational Administration, College of Education, at The Ohio State University. Faculty Advisors were Professors Luvern L. Cunningham, Walter G. Hack, and Lonnie H. Wagstaff.

The Concept of Occupational Ethos

In this inquiry, the senior high school principalship was viewed as an occupation. Lortie (1975), in his study of the ethos of the teaching occupation, and Ogawa (1979), in his study of the superintendent's ethos, focused their works similarly. In the tradition of occupational sociology, the term occupation is inclusive of all work roles in society (Hughes, 1958; Krause, 1971; Pavalko, 1971). Ogawa (1979, p. 5), suggests that occupation is a more neutral term than profession, and hence more useful for this type of study.

Ogawa borrowed from Lortie to define occupational ethos for the purposes of his study. In this investigation, the same definition was employed. Occupational ethos was defined as follows:

> Those general inclinations to act in a particular way which are shared by members of an occupation as indicated in:
>
> 1. The attitudes expressed by members of an occupation towards and resulting from their occupation's recruitment and socialization processes and reward structures, and
>
> 2. The perceptions and attitudes expressed by members of occupation towards their day-to-day work.

How does one develop a description of the occupational ethos of the senior high school principalship? In his study of the superintendency, Ogawa (1979) states that he "borrowed heavily from Lortie's work on the classroom teacher". The same can be stated for the study reported here. In fact, the organizing framework for this investigation was essentially a replication of Lortie's in Schoolteacher.

The description reported here is the result of the analysis of two major dimensions of the occupation of the senior high school principalship: orientations engendered by occupational structures and meanings attached by principals to their work.

Ogawa (1979) aptly characterized this process as one of "analytic distillation". The accompanying chart (Figure 1) was made by Ogawa to depict his approach to the development of a description of the occupational ethos of school superintendents. It has been modified to depict the same approach to developing a description of the occupational ethos of the senior high school principalship.

Figure 1 goes here

Assumptions

To conduct this study, it was necessary to make the following assumptions:

1. The sample of high school principals who served as interview subjects is representative of the total population of senior high school principals, although the sampling procedure utilized does not lend itself to statistical verification.

2. The interviewees' responses reflect their actual perceptions and attitudes.

3. The ethos of an occupation can be inferred from the patterns which emerge in occupation members' characterizations of their work.

4. The questions to which interview subjects responded did focus upon important aspects of the work and occupation of the senior high school principalship.

A comment about the application of findings of a descriptive investigation such as this one is in order. Dan C. Lortie has suggested that studies of public schools have been "long on prescription, short on description" (1975). It is important to note that this study does not test hypotheses. Those practical applications which the findings of such a study may yield, are to be viewed as suggestive rather than prescriptive (Ogawa, 1979).

Procedures

Primary data were gathered through interviews of fifteen persons serving as senior high school principals in Ohio public schools during the 1979-80 school year. The specialized nature of this study and the knowledgeability of those to be interviewed suggested the need for what Dexter characterized as an "elite interview." He defined such an approach as:

> An interview with any interviewee--a stress should be placed on the word "any"--who in terms of the current purposes of the interviewer is given special, non-standardized treatment. By special, non-standardized treatment I mean
> 1. stressing the interviewee's definition of the situation,
> 2. encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation,
> 3. letting the interviewee introduce to a considerable extent (an extent which will of course vary from project to project and interviewer to interviewer) his notions of what he regards as relevant, instead of relying upon the investigator's notions of relevance. (Dexter, 1970)

The "intensive", "elite" interview was particularly appropriate for this study. Previous efforts at describing the ethos of an occupation employed such a strategy (Lortie, 1975; Ogawa, 1979). It was clear that this approach involved less prospect for the generalizability of findings associated with large samples employed in survey research. However, the approach afforded greater accuracy of description and richness of detail than a written survey

would have produced. Webb, et al., pointed out that the interviewer's power to introduce and reintroduce topics allows a greater "density" of relevant data (Webb, et al., 1966).

An interview guide was developed for use in the semi-structured interviews with high school principals. Questions were focused on those dimensions of the occupation which provide insights to its ethos - the occupational structures of recruitment, socialization, and reward, and the meanings which high school principals attach to their work. Questions were general and openended in nature. Interviews were conducted in person, by the researcher, in the principal's own school. Each interview was taperecorded and later transcribed. None of the interviewees objected to a request to taperecord the interview. All respondents were informed that their identities would remain confidential in any and all reporting of data or analysis of data.

Prior to contacting any respondent, a letter was sent to the Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators, outlining the study and requesting an appointment with this individual to discuss the study. A subsequent meeting was held with the Associate Executive Director of OASSA. This meeting was held prior to any of the interviews with principals. The purpose of the meeting was twofold. The first was to enable the researcher to indicate to principals that the proposal had been reviewed with the chief executive of their state professional association. Secondly, the executive's comments were viewed as a valuable source of information about the high school principalship in Ohio.

All interviews were conducted in April, 1980. Each person to be interviewed was sent a letter, outlining the study and requesting an interview.

A phone contact followed to set up an interview appointment and to respond to questions or concerns the person might have about the study.

Sample

Persons to be interviewed were selected from the total population of those individuals serving as senior high school principals in Central Ohio, that is, in the seventeen counties that are within a 75 mile radius of the City of Columbus. The use of a small sample of respondents was dictated by the data collection technique (intensive interviewing), and the limited financial and time resources at the disposal of the investigator. It was understood that this placed severe limitations on the generalizability of findings. It also limited the relative stability of responses and the possibility of analysis of subgroups within the target population. Ogawa (1979) suggested that these limitations are offset by the depth of understanding which interviews provide. In the same vein, Lortie noted that the "benefits of intensity are purchased at the cost of scope" with the methodology employed here (Lortie, 1975).

A total of fifteen high school principals were interviewed. The sampling frame for this study consisted of a list of the 106 public high schools in the "universe" of the 17 counties in Central Ohio, which offer programs in grades 9 through 12 or grades 10 through 12. Schools which had any other grade grouping and regional joint vocational schools were not included in the frame. This "purposive" or "judgmental" approach was applied because it was determined that a population and sample consisting entirely of comprehensive 9 through 12 and 10 through 12 senior high schools was

desirable. Thus, atypical elements of the universe were not included in the frame, and a probability sample was selected.

The list of 106 high schools in the sampling frame was displayed to be sampled from. First, counties were listed alphabetically. Second, school districts were listed alphabetically within each county, with city districts first, exempted villages second, and local districts third. Third, high schools were listed alphabetically within each of the three types of school districts.

A systematic sample was selected with a selection interval of 7. This interval was obtained by dividing the population size (106) by the desired sample size (15). This type of probability sampling was carried out until selections were made from 1 to 105. In fact, 14 of the initial 15 respondents selected participated in the study and the next subject in the selection process replaced the one non-participant. The individual who declined to be interviewed stated a lack of time as the reason he could not participate.

In the final sample selection, there were 7 city district high schools, 7 local district high schools, and 1 exempted village district high school. The actual ratio of city to local to exempted village high schools in the frame was 9.4: 10.8: 1.0. This indicates a representative sample by district type.

Occupational Structures

Recruitment. The occupational recruitment structure of the senior high school principalship is characterized by elements common to many other occupations and factors unique to the principalship.

Principal 7 states that "upward mobility, money, and challenge lured me" to the occupation. Other principals referred to the principalship as "a stepping stone", "chance to get ahead", "a more prestigious job than teaching". While it was clear that principals were attracted by the salary and prestige associated with the occupation, other attractions were more fundamental to the group as a whole.

The opportunity to be of service to society is characteristic of educational occupations. High school principals were attracted by the opportunity to improve a particular high school program. Principals spoke of wanting to "change things for the better", "do things for youngsters." Principal 13 taught under a "poor" principal and entered the occupation to "create an atmosphere where teachers could teach and students could learn." Most principals had high expectations about what an effective principal could accomplish. Principal 3's comment is representative: "The principal was the fellow who put everything together and made the thing go."

While all of the principals aspired to the principalship as classroom teachers, their entry into administration was most often a chance occurrence. Being "tapped" by a mentor or patron is a common story. Principal 10 spoke of the man who gave him his first vice-principalship.

> My old principal took the time to compliment, praise and mentor me. It was an absolute break to work and learn under such a principal at such a young age.

That "absolute break" is an important key to the recruitment structure of the high school principalship. More often than not, principals recruit principals. Wolcott (1973) describes this process by which teachers become principals in two complementary modes and casts them in the jargon of the literature of

of educational administration--"sponsorship" and "CASing" (i.e. Getting the Attention of Superiors, a term first used by Daniel E. Griffiths in a 1963 study of teacher mobility).

Socialization. Occupational sociologists and other students of work roles have observed two dimensions of occupational socialization-training programs and on-the-job experience (Pavalko, 1971; Lortie, 1975; Ogawa, 1979). Principals' comments were analyzed for patterns in occupational socialization. Formal and informal levels of socialization within each dimension were probed in interviews.

High school principals do not view formal training programs as the sources of attributes, skills and knowledge necessary in the occupation. This is a general response. Principal 8's remark is representative.

> I got very little out of university courses that was practical. Courses and books don't do it. Theory doesn't help me on the job.

It is important to note that widespread complaints about formal graduate studies in education were findings in previous studies of the ethos of educational occupations. (Lortie, 1975; Ogawa, 1979). In assessing the relationship between higher education and the principalship, Wolcott describes a paradox which may provide some hint as to orientations resulting from this part of the socialization process.

> Thus in their process of becoming, principals learn to eschew the formal system of education even as they come to realize that in their chosen careers they can never escape its influence. At the same time, it is their steadfast belief in the importance of formal education for others that gives them their highest professional purpose (p. 206).

Principals spoke positively of informal experiences in their "Ed. Adm." course work. In pursuing their administrative credentials, principals developed bonds with many colleagues who shared the experience. Principal 14's observation was echoed several times:

> University training in administration has not been very helpful. It is really valuable though, as a forum.

It was clear throughout this inquiry that high school principals viewed on-the-job experience as the most important part of their occupational training. Most did qualify their comments by stating that ability was a given prerequisite. One principal observed that "A weak person can get all of the training in the world and you still know he'll be worthless as a principal" (Principal 5).

Principals use phrases like "make it or break it", "do or die", "baptism by fire", and "sink or swim" to characterize their on-the-job training. One veteran principal said the experience made him "smart enough to not get in where I'm not smart enough to operate" (Principal 9).

While principals went into detail describing experiences in the principalship as important training, they also emphasized personal qualities and life experiences as key sources of skills. Principals place a high value on breadth of experience and diversity of background. They speak positively of "the school of hard knocks", "factory work with common men", "having been poor", "the service", and "knowing how the other half lives".

High school principals are not very dramatic in describing the qualities which lead to success in the occupation - integrity, sense of fair play, consistency, hard work, concern about teachers and students, and sincerity.

Reward. The reward structure is the third and final of the occupational structures examined in this study of the occupational ethos of the senior high

school principalship. Dan C. Lortie (1975) has proposed that the surrounding structure and culture of an occupation are likely to influence the emphasis on certain kinds of rewards rather than others.

Most principals were quite candid about the importance of monetary rewards in their occupation. In discussing what is rewarding about working as a high school principal, salary was often mentioned but rarely discussed at length. It appears to be a given for members of the occupation.

In discussing rewards, high school principals focus on the attitudes and feelings of students and teachers, rather than measurable achievements. While teachers speak of individual student growth and superintendents discuss test scores and merit scholars, principals talk in terms of "harmony", "teacher satisfaction", "resolving conflict", and "good staff and student morale." While principals talk of organizational effectiveness, the results they seek from their efforts are spoken of in terms of individuals.

Work Meanings

Certain distinct patterns emerged from an analysis of high school principals' descriptions of their work. When queried about their chief responsibilities, principals rarely spoke of specific tasks or duties. Principals clearly view their duties in global terms. The following comments are illustrative:

> My job is to make the ship run right. (Principal 2)
>
> ...to make all the students and teachers happy. (Principal 7)
>
> ...keeping the system functioning and managing people's lives. (Principal 14)

In addition, principals describe an overwhelming problem with the unpredictable

nature of their day-to-day work. Most principals indicated that they have an "open door, no appointment necessary" policy for teachers and students. Principal 3 expresses a prevailing point of view.

> There are continual interruptions, but they are necessary. Teachers and students need to feel comfortable interrupting me at anytime. We need that or we get buried in minutiae. I'd lose contact. If I can't finish my tasks, I come back when no one is here.

In a similar vein, Principal 5 says

> No two days are the same. The routines have to come second to that which arises. The agenda evolves. I'm not the guy who decides what I do. Thats the way it has to be. That is the challenge of the principalship.

All of this would suggest that high school principals are harried professionals who have little or no control over the allocation of their time, energy and resources.

However, principals exhibit a definite sense of control over their time and attention through their actions. Each of the principals in the interview sample followed a schedule and gave the appearance of being in control of his individual situation. This would suggest that principals describe their work in terms of the impressions they seek to convey as much as in terms of the details of their tasks and responsibilities.

The Occupational Ethos of the Senior High School Principalship

Similar themes are reflected in the occupational orientations of senior high school principals and the meanings they attach to their work. These themes in turn are descriptive of the basic elements of the occupational ethos of the high school principalship. They are the findings of this inquiry:

1. An insular view of the high school social system. High school princi-

pals talk like "ship captains". They spice their comments with metaphors like "keeping afloat", "staying on course", and "weathering the storm". Most principals are recruited from within high schools. It is a prevailing view among those high school principals interviewed that you learn the skills of the high school principalship on the job. In addition, it is clear that many of the work attitudes of respondent principals were shaped by their experiences in their own high schools. High school principals were queried about those aspects of their work which are "most rewarding", "least rewarding", "sources of staisfaction", "roadblocks to success", and "evidence of success." It was evident from their responses that high school principals look within their schools for that which is rewarding and satisfying, and for evidence of success or reason for lack thereof.

2. An emphasis on <u>style</u>. In discussing factors which influence success in their high schools, principals place major emphasis on leadership style. Most high school principals indicate that they were recruited into the principalship because of such things as "personality", "ability to make decisions", "guts", "moxie", or "knowing how to get along with people." Knowledge of educational administration or instructional expertise was rarely mentioned in this vein. Most principals echoed the sentiment that "how" you do things is often more important than "what" you do. Longer experience in the principalship seems to further reinforce this view.

3. A concern for the <u>process</u> of schooling <u>rather than</u> the <u>product</u>. Each of the principals interviewed expressed concern for student achievement and the need for results in the instructional program. However, in detailed, probing discussions of their day to day work, things like "saving" a wayward student or teacher or "turning someone around" were seen as more gratifying than more dramatic

success stories. This type of attitude was also described as the kind that was attractive in prospective principals.

4. A sense of control over the domain of the high school. Principals, like members of other educational occupations, continually decry their loss of control over their domain. Subject principals expressed similar views initially. However in protracted discussions and in the two to four hour visits with the interviewer, none of the principals gave evidence of not being in control of their respective situations. The prevailing image of the high school principals interviewed was of people who felt they had control over their organizations.

In summary, it has been suggested that high school principals see themselves as a buffer between their school and the outside world. Their orientation is toward the high school as a closed social system. Principals are not particularly sensitive to the external environment of the school. Leadership style occupies the attention of high school principals more than organizational structure. The attitudes and feelings of teachers and students are attended to more than their performances in their roles. Finally, high school principals see themselves as very much "in control" and "on top of" their schools.

Both the orientations engendered by occupational structures and the meanings attached by principals to their work reflect the basic elements of the occupational ethos of the high school principalship:

1. An insular view of the high school social system, 2. An emphasis on style, 3. A concern for the process of schooling rather than the product, 4. A sense of control over the domain of the high school.

Conclusion

Limitations which characterized this study are rooted in the nature of the overall purpose and in research methods employed to achieve that purpose.

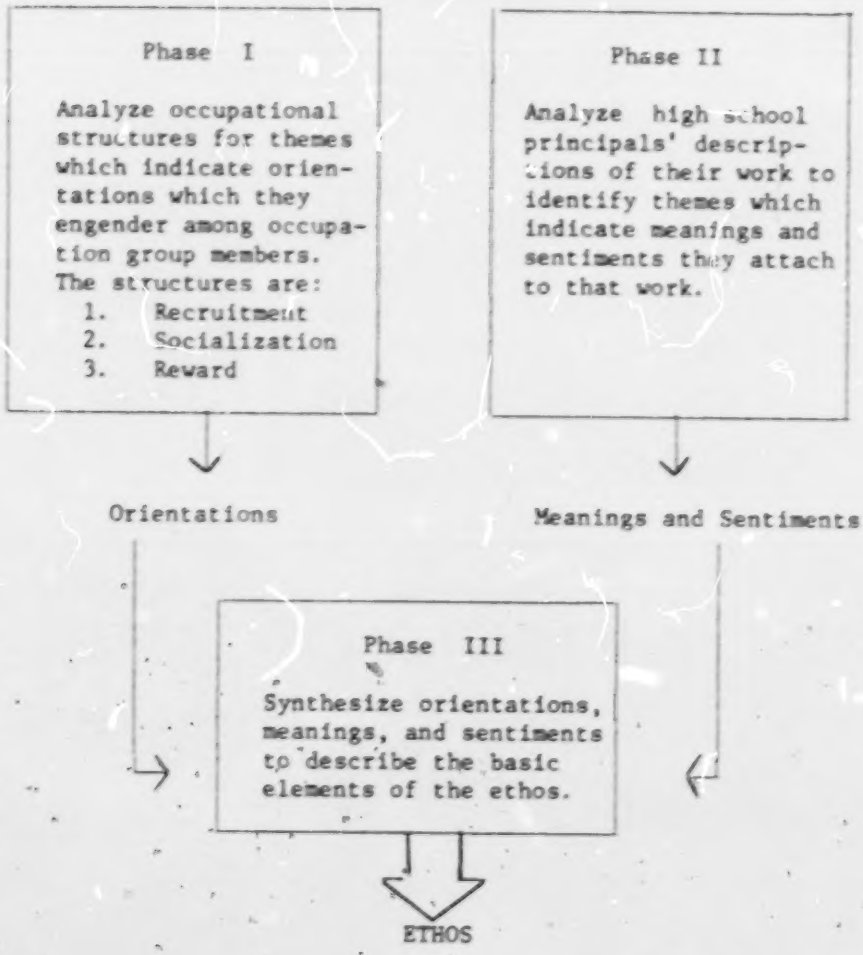
The theoretical concept of "ethos" is both broad and vague. As with many other social scientific theories, its essential qualities are a matter of speculation. Certainly, the characteristics of ethos which emerged were to some degree determined by the research questions asked and the theoretical perspective derived from Lortie and Ogawa. A problem inherent in the research process is the likelihood that elements of the problem will be overlooked. In this case, dimensions of the ethos of the high school principal possibly went undetected. The complexity of identifying and describing those elements of the ethos which gave direction to this study, precluded purely empirical observation and insured the need for some inference in observations made.

Research methods employed allowed for the collection of a wide array of attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. However, the cost of those methods precluded the use of a large sample of high school principals. This in turn prevents the kind of statistical assessment which leads to generalizability of findings.

Further inquiry would help substantiate whether the findings of this study are descriptive of the nature and content of the ethos of the high school principalship. While particular elements of the ethos of the high school principal may resemble those of other occupations, it is what Lortie calls "the particular constellation" of orientations and sentiments unique to the high school principal which was sought.

FIGURE 1

Approach to the Description of the Occupational Ethos of the Senior High School Principalship


Phase I
Analyze occupational structures for themes which indicate orientations which they engender among occupation group members. The structures are:
1. Recruitment
2. Socialization
3. Reward
Phase II
Analyze high school principals' descriptions of their work to identify themes which indicate meanings and sentiments they attach to that work.
Orientations
Meanings and Sentiments
Phase III
Synthesize orientations, meanings, and sentiments to describe the basic elements of the ethos.
ETHOS

Note. From "A Descriptive Investigation of the Occupational Ethos of the School Superintendency" by Rodney T. Ogawa, Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1979, 14. Copyright 1979 by Rodney T. Ogawa. Reprinted by permission.

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